

*McNamara's "no-cities" doctrine that proposed a new nuclear strategy where the US would only target military installations of the enemy and avoid population centers.*

---

## The No-Cities Doctrine

University of Michigan Commencement, June 1962  
Defense Secretary Robert McNamara

---

I am glad to be home, and I am particularly glad to be here for a university occasion. For this university gives meaning and focus to life in Ann Arbor -- even for those who are not privileged to be associated with it directly -- as the academic community serves to clarify the objectives and focus the energies of the free world. ...

What I want to talk to you about here today are some of the concrete problems of maintaining a free community in the world today. I want to talk to you particularly about the problems of the community that bind together the United States and the countries of Western Europe. ...

The North Atlantic Alliance is a unique alignment of governments. The provision for the common defense of the members has led to a remarkable degree of military collaboration and diplomatic consultation for a peacetime coalition. ...

Today, NATO is involved in a number of controversies, which must be resolved by achieving a consensus within the organization in order to preserve its strength and unity. The question has arisen whether Senator Vandenberg's assertion is as true today as it was when he made it 13 years ago. Three arguments have raised this question most sharply:

> It has been argued that the very success of Western European economic development reduces Europe's need to rely on the U.S. to share in its defenses.

! It has been argued that nuclear capabilities are alone relevant in the face of the growing nuclear threat, and that independent national nuclear forces are sufficient to protect the nations of Europe.

I believe that all of these arguments are mistaken. I think it is worthwhile to expose the U.S. views on these issues as we have presented them to our allies. In our view, the effect of the new factors in the situation, both economic and military, has been to increase the interdependence of national security interest on both sides of the Atlantic, and to enhance the need for the closest coordination of our efforts.

A central military issue facing NATO today is the role of nuclear strategy. Four facts seem to us to dominate consideration of that role. All of them point in the direction of increased integration to achieve our common defense. First, the Alliance has overall nuclear strength adequate to any challenge confronting it. Second, this strength not only minimizes the likelihood of major nuclear war, but it makes possible a strategy designed to preserve the fabric of our societies if war should occur. Third, damage to the civil societies of the Alliance resulting from nuclear warfare could be very grave. Fourth, improved non-nuclear forces, well within the Alliance resources, could enhance deterrence of any aggressive moves short of direct, all-out attack on Western Europe.

Let us look at the situation today. First, given the current balance of nuclear power, which we



confidently expect to maintain in the years ahead, a surprise nuclear attack is simply not a rational act for any enemy. Nor would it be rational for an enemy to take the initiative in the use of nuclear weapons as an outgrowth of a limited engagement in Europe or elsewhere. I think we are entitled to conclude that either of these actions has been made highly unlikely.

Second, and equally important, the mere fact that no nation could rationally take steps leading to a nuclear war does not guarantee that a nuclear war cannot take place. Not only do nations sometimes act in ways that are hard to explain on a rational basis, but even when acting in a "rational" way they sometimes, indeed disturbingly often, act on the basis of misunderstandings of the true facts of a situation. They misjudge the way others will react, and the way others will interpret what they are doing. We must hope, indeed I think we have good reason to hope, that all sides will understand this danger, and will refrain from steps that even raise the possibility of such a mutually disastrous misunderstanding. We have taken unilateral steps to reduce the likelihood of such an occurrence. We look forward to the prospect that through arms control, the actual use of these terrible weapons may be completely avoided. It is a problem not just for us in the West, but for all nations that are involved in this struggle we call the Cold War.

For our part, we feel, and our NATO allies must frame our strategy with this terrible contingency, however remote, in mind, simply ignoring the problem is not going to make it go away.

The U.S. has come to the conclusion that to the extent feasible, basic military strategy in a possible general nuclear war should be approached in much the same way that more conventional military operations have been regarded in the past. That is to say, principal military objectives, in the event of a nuclear war stemming from a major attack on the Alliance, should be the destruction of the enemy's forces, not of his civilian population.

The very strength and nature of the Alliance forces make it possible for us to retain, even in the face of a massive surprise attack, sufficient reserve striking power to destroy an enemy society if driven to it. In other words, we are giving a possible opponent the strongest imaginable incentive to refrain from striking our own cities. ...

In particular, relatively weak national nuclear forces with enemy cities as their targets are not likely to be sufficient to perform even the function of deterrence. If they are small, and perhaps vulnerable on the ground or in the air, or inaccurate, a major antagonist can take a variety of measures to counter them. Indeed, if a major antagonist came to believe there was a substantial likelihood of it being used independently, this force would be inviting a pre-emptive first strike against it. In the event of war, the use of such a force against the cities of a major nuclear power would be tantamount to suicide, whereas its employment against significant military targets would have a negligible effect on the outcome of the conflict. [Meanwhile, the creation of a single additional national nuclear force encourages the proliferation of nuclear power with all its attendant dangers.]

In short, then, limited nuclear capabilities, operating independently, are dangerous, expensive, prone to obsolescence, and lacking in credibility as a deterrent. Clearly, the United States nuclear contribution to the Alliance is neither obsolete nor dispensable.

At the same time, the general strategy I have summarized magnifies the importance of unity of planning, concentration of executive authority, and central direction. [There must not be the contingency of nuclear war.] We are convinced that a general nuclear war target system is indivisible, and if, despite all our efforts, nuclear war should occur, our best hope lies in conducting a centrally controlled campaign



against all of the enemy's vital nuclear capabilities, while retaining reserve forces, all centrally controlled.

We know that the same forces which are targeted on ourselves are also targeted on our allies. Our own strategic retaliatory forces are prepared to respond against these forces, wherever they are and whatever their targets. This mission is assigned not only in fulfillment of our treaty commitments but also because the character of nuclear war compels it. More specifically, the U.S. is as much concerned with that portion of Soviet nuclear striking power that can reach Western Europe as with that portion that also can reach the United States. In short, we have undertaken the nuclear defense of NATO on a global basis. This will continue to be our objective. In the execution of this mission, the weapons in the European theater are only one resource among many.

There is, for example, the Polaris force, which we have been substantially increasing, and which, because of its specifically invulnerable nature, is peculiarly well-suited to serve as a strategic reserve force. We have already announced the commitment of five of these ships, fully operational, to the NATO command.

This sort of commitment has a corollary for the Alliance as a whole. We want and need a greater degree of Alliance participation in formulating nuclear weapons policy to the greatest extent possible. We would all find it intolerable to contemplate having only a part of the strategic force launched in isolation from our main striking power.

74 > We shall continue to maintain powerful nuclear forces for the Alliance as a whole. ...

But let us be clear about what we are saying and what we have to face if the deterrent should fail. This is the almost certain prospect that, despite our nuclear strength, all of us would suffer deeply in the event of major nuclear war.

We accept our share of this responsibility within the Alliance. And we believe that the combination of our nuclear strength and a strategy of controlled response gives us some hope of minimizing damage in the event that we have to fulfill our pledge. But I must point out that we do not regard this as a desirable prospect, nor do we believe that the Alliance should depend solely on our nuclear power to deter actions not involving a massive commitment of any hostile force. Surely an Alliance with the wealth, talent, and experience that we possess can find a better way than extreme reliance on nuclear weapons to meet our common threat. We do not believe that if the formula  $E=MC^2$  had not been discovered, we should all be Communist slaves. On this question, I can see no valid reason for a fundamental difference of view on the two sides of the Atlantic.

$$E = mc^2$$

With the Alliance possessing the strength and the strategy I have described, it is most unlikely that any power will launch a nuclear attack on NATO. For the kinds of conflicts, both political and military, most likely to arise in the NATO area, our capabilities for response must not be limited to nuclear weapons alone. The Soviets must have superiority in non-nuclear forces in Europe today. But that superiority is by no means overwhelming. Collectively, the Alliance has the potential for a successful defense against such forces. In manpower alone, NATO has more men under arms than the Soviet Union and its European satellites. We have already shown our willingness to contribute through our divisions now in place on European soil. In order to defend the populations of the NATO countries and to meet our treaty obligations, we have put in hand a series of measures to strengthen our non-nuclear power. ...

We expect that our allies will also undertake to strengthen further their non-nuclear forces, and to

improve the quality and staying power of these forces. These achievements will complement our deterrent strength. With improvements in Alliance ground force strength and staying power, improved non-nuclear air capabilities, and better equipped and trained reserve forces, we can be assured that no deficiency exists in the NATO defense of this vital region, and that no aggression, small or large, can succeed.

I have described very briefly the United States' views on the role of nuclear forces in the strategy of the Alliance. I have pointed out that the Alliance necessarily depends, for the deterrence of general nuclear war, on the powerful and well-protected nuclear forces of the United States, which are necessarily committed to respond to enemy nuclear strikes wherever they may be made. At the same time, I have indicated the need for substantial non-nuclear forces within the Alliance to deal with situations where a nuclear response may be inappropriate or simply not believable. Throughout I have emphasized that we in the Alliance all need each other.

I want to remind you also that the security provided by military strength is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the achievement of our foreign policy goals, including our goals in the field of arms control and disarmament. Military security provides a base on which we can build free-world strength through the economic advances and political reforms which are the object of the president's programs, like the Alliance for Progress and the Trade Expansion legislation. Only in a peaceful world can we give full scope to the individual potential, which is for us the ultimate value.

---